

Testimony of Legal Momentum in Support of H.B. No. 6494, An Act Concerning Teen Dating Violence Education

Before the Education Committee

February 23, 2009

Legal Momentum, formerly the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, supports H.B. No. 6494, An Act Concerning Teen Dating Violence Education. Legal Momentum is the nation's oldest legal advocacy organization dedicated to advancing the rights of women and girls. In September 2008 Legal Momentum established a Teen Dating Abuse Program to educate school officials about the issue and to press for systemic approaches to prevention and management of violence consistent with legal obligations.

Teen dating violence is a serious and growing problem nationwide, with physical, sexual, or emotion abuse affecting somewhere between 10 and 30 percent of teens. Dating abuse is correlated with numerous other problems including higher rates of teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, and poor school performance. This violence is beginning earlier than ever, as teens today often begin dating before even entering high school. Most parents are not aware of the prevalence of dating violence among teens, and up to 97 percent of abused teens never tell an adult about the abuse. Despite the data showing that dating violence is a serious problem among teens, most teens never receive any education or information on the issue and how to address it.

This bill seeks to provide children and teens with knowledge about dating violence in the school curriculum. This education is crucial; studies as well as our own work with teens have found that many teens do not recognize acts of dating violence, sexual assault, or sexual harassment as such. Education is necessary to teach teens the signs of abuse before they find themselves in dangerous or harmful situations. Similarly, teens do not generally receive information on services for victims of dating violence or school resources that might aid them in addressing this problem. By requiring dating violence education in the public school curriculum, we ensure that Connecticut's teens will be prepared to recognize and avoid dating violence and domestic violence throughout their lives.

Five states—Georgia, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia—already have laws that require or encourage school districts to incorporate teen dating violence education into their curricula; many also require schools to adopt policies for responding to dating violence on campus. Indiana and New York currently have bills pending that would require similar education and policies. A few school districts, including Oakland, CA and Washington, D.C., have also implemented requirements for dating violence education and policies independent of legislation on the issue.



We commend Connecticut for being proactive in its approach to addressing teen dating abuse through education. Too often legislatures have ignored teen dating violence until a high profile incident of violence or murder between students forces them to confront the issue. Schools too have often turned a blind eye to teen dating violence, only enacting dating abuse policies or procedures after being exposed to legal liability for failing to address abuse on campus. Connecticut has wisely recognized that preventive education is the most effective way to address dating abuse and keep its students safe.

Education is the first step in preventing the epidemic of dating and domestic violence that affects so many people in Connecticut.

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